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RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002424

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SUBJECT: PAD LEADER OPPOSES DECEMBER ELECTIONS, INTERIM GOVERNMENT

REF: 05 BANGKOK 7197 (THE KING AND HIM)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Alexander A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: One of the most prominent leaders of the anti-Thaksin "People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)," whose massive rallies paved the way for the ouster of PM Thaksin, said he opposed holding elections in December. Media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul complained that there has been no political reform since the September coup, and elections this year would just return Thailand to the same problems it was facing before the coup. He told Polcouns on April 26 that he would consider supporting junta chief GEN Sonthi to replace interim PM Surayud, but the general would have to commit to holding elections in 2008, to a timetable for political and media reform, and to a genuinely inclusive process. Sondhi pointed out the need to reform the institution of the monarchy as well. Sondhi has not made a final decision on whether to support the ouster of PM Surayud, and he does not yet appear to have the support of all the elements of the loosely-knit PAD coalition. Polcouns emphasized the importance of holding elections this year to avoid both international condemnation and a backlash within Thailand. Sondhi appears motivated largely by his deep-seated hatred of Thaksin. He overestimates his influence, but he could cause some problems for the interim government and the election timetable if he rallied his supporters to oppose the constitution and December elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Sondhi Limthongkul, rabble-rousing leader of the anti-Thaksin demonstrations last year, told Polcouns on April 26 that he opposed holding elections in December because "there has been no political or media reform." He complained that the government has done nothing to educate the grassroots (i.e., Thaksin supporters) and therefore the elections would not lead to democracy, but would just return Thailand to the same problems it faced under Thaksin.

SONDHI AND SONTHI

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¶3. (C) Polcouns asked Sondhi about the rumors that he had swung his support to junta chief GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin, and that the powerful anti-Thaksin coalition People's

Alliance for Democracy (PAD) wanted to oust PM Surayud. Sondhi said that he would consider supporting the general to be prime minister under very specific circumstances. First, GEN Sonthi would have to "make a contract" setting an election date in 2008. He would have to lay out a "quarter-by-quarter" timetable for political and media reform. He would have to make it a genuinely inclusive process, with a new legislative assembly and a new cabinet. Genuinely inclusive meant that it should include politicians, who have been, after all, the elected representatives of the people. This appointed legislative assembly could therefore be "almost like an elected one." The cabinet should include politicians from the political parties as well.

¶4. (C) Sondhi said that he would have to wait to see the result of important events in May and June before deciding whether to commit his support to the general. The court would decide whether to dissolve Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party and the Democrat Party at the end of May. The Assets Examination Commission was expected to take some significant steps against Thaksin in the coming weeks as well. These events would have a major effect on the political landscape.

¶5. (C) Finally, by June the probable fate of the draft constitution would become clearer. "This draft constitution does not give the military what it needs," Sondhi said. It was possible that the 100-member Constitution Drafting Assembly, which must approve the draft constitution before it goes to public referendum, would vote to reject the draft. "GEN Sonthi wants Surayud out, but he cannot ask him," Sondhi said (because Surayud had been GEN Sonthi's boss and because the PM still has support from influential Privy Council President Prem.) The rejection of the draft constitution by

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the Assembly could provoke a political crisis; that crisis could provide the excuse for GEN Sonthi to sideline Surayud and step in, Sondhi speculated. "Let's talk again in June," he suggested.

WHAT A TERRIBLE IDEA

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¶6. (C) Polcouns said that any move of this kind would be condemned by the international community and would not be accepted by the Thai people. We firmly believed that elections this year were necessary. Trust in and support for the interim government and the coup-makers' Council for National Security is already low and falling. Why would anyone believe GEN Sonthi's "contract" for reform and elections in 2008 if he broke the promises he has already made -- to return to elected government and not to take over as PM? Furthermore, GEN Sonthi's performance has given no evidence that he is even capable of leading the country through such a long and difficult period. "But he wants to," Sondhi replied. He went on to say, essentially, that the public would accept the general's leadership if he received Sondhi Limthongkul's imprimatur, and kept to the timetable promised.

"THIS MADMAN SONDHI"

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¶7. (C) Sondhi took the occasion to review his role in the overthrow of PM Thaksin. Thaksin had disturbed the order of Thai society, he said. Previously, there had been an established relationship between the 'feudal' elements of Thai society (meaning the Palace and the circle of old elite families) and the business community. Patronage flowed across the bridge in one direction, money and fidelity in the other. Thaksin had destroyed that bridge, and tried to isolate the King as a purely symbolic figure. He interfered in the military, which was the King's domain. No one had dared to challenge Thaksin, however, until "this madman Sondhi" began to rally opposition, said Sondhi, referring to himself in the third person. Sondhi used his cable TV access

to reach the neglected middle class ("12 million viewers") all around Thailand. This middle-class ("largely Chinese-Thai," he added) had always paid their taxes in full, but got nothing for it.

#### REFORM OF THE MONARCHY

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18. (C) Looking ahead, Sondhi said that one important issue that had to be addressed was whether the King would permit the reform of the monarchy and the institutions around it. The King, at 80 years old, had "at best`{Va'}Ntfor the Privy Council: an end to lucrative positions as board members of big companies. Sondhi said he had publicly criticized Privy Council President Prem for taking money from so many companies; in response, he claimed, Prem was resigning from the board of CP (a controversial conglomerate that had supported PM Thaksin), but would retain his seat on the board of less controversial companies, like Bangkok Bank.

#### COMMENT

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19. (C) Since the beginning of his anti-Thaksin demonstrations, Sondhi Limthongkul has been driven foremost by a deep and personal hatred of former PM Thaksin. PM Surayud has frustrated the hard-core anti-Thaksin faction with his emphasis on reconciliation and on a slow and legally-defensible investigation of corruption allegations. It is worth noting that Sondhi was speaking personally, and did not claim to be speaking for all of the PAD, at least not yet. In our view, Sondhi overestimates his own influence, but, even so, he could cause trouble for the interim government and the election timetable if he decides to rally

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opposition to the constitution and December elections.  
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